NEW YORK VISCERA

ALEXANDER PENNEY
@awrvp
linktr.ee/awrvp

& PRESS
@andpresslit
andpresslit.com

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Canal Street and Broadway; 6:18 PM

The flesh of brick and stone tears away from the bones of iron that reach up from the streets, grasping at the already darkened night. I stare with vacant, hazel eyes at the lights of one titan reflected in the glass face of a younger one. It's early December and the temperature has dropped from its already low point while the sun was out. I pull my coat in tighter, fighting off the chill. Wind whips down the streets amongst the score of bodies ambling in every direction. Sirens, car horns, conversations on top of conversations, a man asking not so politely for the contents of my pockets. He looks desperate, so I continue to ignore him and hope for the best.

The lights are too much. Headlights, streetlights, hundreds of phone screens, the neon twenty feet up, illuminated restaurants, bodegas, and bars, and not a single star, but the moon hangs meekly amongst it all. Her hue is almost lilac, or so I wish. I've left my life, and now I have nowhere to head. Engulfed in the lights, I decide I will become a 21st-century Debord and see where the city will take me.

Washington Square Arch; 7:14 PM

Movement, over my shoulder. Movement, in front of each step. Movement, at the bottom of my stomach as the stench of flesh pulses around me. Movement, as my eyes trace the lights of this place. Movement, as a young NYU student sits next to me holding an earmarked copy of Infinite Jest. The pages blend with his fingers as he contemplates being contemplated.

I ask the reader what is hoped to be gained in reading? I ask the reader if the author really had anything worth saying? I ask the reader if words on a page mean anything, do they mean more or less if the author is dead? If there was not much to take from it before, is it at least a relic of a dead mind, a consciousness fading in dirt or ash?

No response, just continues to read.

I fumble with your lighter that you left behind on my bedside with a few strands of your hair. The hair smelled of sweetness and the fire smells of my longing, so I burnt the hair and now the stench of death lingers in my bedroom, the stench of what we have become.

I burn the calluses off my left-hand fingers until it begins to unnerve the faces surrounding me.

8th Ave and Horatio Street; 9:43 PM

My face is foreign in the bar bathroom. My jaw hangs at an angle that seems impossible, and I have too many teeth. I came in to get away from the distorted faces that were near-shouting as they circled me at the small table I had managed to squeeze myself into an hour before. But my face looks worse, ancient glyphs carved into the skin around my eyes. I try to see if I can read them but all that comes out of my mouth is ash.

The door opens and the bartender with a half dozen compound eyes shrieks from a proboscis, glaring at me, a line of coyotes behind bearing teeth into the gloom of this single bare bulbed haven. I mutter something and splash water on my face and make my exit.

Jackson Square; 9:50 PM

Ring. Ring. Ring. Ring. Ring. Silence.

My fingers trace the skin where those glyphs had appeared on my face, trying to retain their shape.

Ring. Ring. Ring. Ring. Ring. Silence.

“What is that?” A passing figure asks. A shadowy tendril wriggles from his arm in the direction of, as far as my eyes see, nothing. Lips meet and they laugh.

Ring. Ring. Ring. Ringringringringringringringringring.

“Yes?”

“Hey, how are you doin’?”

“I…I’m good, you?”

“Great, listen, we got caught up at John’s place but we are gonna get brunch tomorrow with Steph so you should meet us at Bocado, OK?”

“Yeah…yeah sounds good, what time?”

“I’ll let you know, gotta go, James just came back...”

The voice lingers in my eardrums, drilling slowly into the part of my brain where my self-loathing sits. These days, it feels like that could be most of the segments.

The couple from before are sitting on the bench diagonally counting the nonexistent stars and laughing with a wine-soaked glee. A man walks by for a fourth time asking for change or any leftovers and for the fourth time, I lie and say I don't carry cash. He doesn't seem to hear me.

He lies on the bench next to me and moth wings begin to sprout out of the holes in his worn winter coat. I watch as they struggle with new life, beating awkwardly. A few moments and they seem to have gained their strength. A few more and they carry him upandupandup and he feasts on a pigeon perched on the building just behind the couple, now busy carving their night into the tree beside them.

The man continues to rise into the sky, chasing the lilac of the evening. The jagged mouth of the city releases him into the darkness and he sings:

> "No arms reach out to me
> No eyes smile tenderly
> Still, in peaceful dreams, I see
> The road leads back to you
>
> I said, New York
> Oh, New York, no peace I find
> Just an old man's song
> In New York, I'll die"

Either the L or the G Train; 2:?? AM

Fuck, the electric shadows are humming endlessly.

Hum
Hummm
Hummmmmmmm
Hummmmmmmmmmmmm
Hum.

It rattles my brain, I can taste it on my tongue.

The lights reflect off every inch of the train and the flies buzz around the sleeping man's feet.

How did flies even end up on the train?

His massive foot lolls about and swings, knocking over his beer. He stirs and screams, and I scream, and everyone on the train screams for the fallen beer.

Home; 9:52 AM

Waking seems futile.

At least my face has resumed a shape that is more or less recognizable. I stare at the mirror just long enough to check it is still there but not long enough to see the thing breathing down my neck, in case it decides to manifest itself.

The morning instills in me a dread different from the dread of the evening. Life needs to happen. The clothes should really be folded and put away, dishes cleaned, emails answered, phone calls returned, meals cooked, loans paid, and so on.

I think about calling my parents and nausea crashes over me in waves.

I think about texting a friend but my head pounds with the force of an atomic bomb.

I think about calling you and I crucify that thought on the wall and stare at it for the next hour.

Herbert Von King Park; 11:36 AM

With coffee in my hand, I trace new shapes I have never seen around the two-block park, kicking up dust and dirt in my wake.

The caffeine races through my racing thoughts like birds chasing insectsandinsectsandinsects crawling about my brain. They burrow into the folds and build colonies of desperate thoughts, violent thoughts, thoughts that frighten the birds to the point of fleeing. The insects win over and I throw my coffee across the path accompanied by a guttural sound I can't place.

Stares. Silence. Confusion. Anger. Bewilderment.

What the fuck did I do that for?

I remember it is almost noon and I forgot to take my meds at 7:00 AM because I was still asleep then and hungover after.

I walk over to the overturned paper cup, clumsily grab the thing and rush to the nearest overflowing garbage can to try to rectify the past.

It tumbles off twice before I sigh and walk to a bench on the other side of the park.

Herbert Von King Park, again; 11:50 AM

The thumb on my right-hand traces endless circles in my palm. An incantation, a ritual of racing thoughts with no outlet.

I text my mother “hey, you workin?”

And waitwaitwait.

Wait

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And she replies “Yeah.”

I stare at the 3 hours and 50 minutes that my Kindle says is left in my copy of “Human Acts” by Han Kang and decide I’ll read more tomorrow as I stare at the “Human Acts” happening all around me.

Lexington between 87th and 88th; 1:48 PM

Dahlias bloom inside my lungs at the question.

“..what?”

“I said, what do you do?”

Silence.

“You know, like, for work?”

Coffee burns away at the petals and the roots as I gulp it down.

“I actually just left my job yesterday...I haven’t really figured out what is next.”

Silence.

The sound of silverware hitting porcelain, scrapping toast, a chattering of Saturday morning, drinks being poured.

“He’s is brilliant, I am sure something new will come along soon, they’ll be foolish not to offer you something, isn’t that right?”

My brother is ashamed, so he sings my praises that stopped being true in the eighth grade. Successful, married, put-together with a calendar that is bursting at the seams, he can’t see why I continue to embarrass him in front of his

friends, and I can't see why he continues to invite me with this scarlet F on my chest.

"The...what's the word you use to describe it? Post-modern modalities of non-hierarchical healing? Whatever, it's above my head, but it's that shit the people all over Twitter fucking eat up, and even if you believe in all that horseshit, it's just buzzwordy enough that any place should be clamoring to hire this brilliant bastard."

I don't understand a fucking word he said either.

"Jared, what do you mean 'horse-shit'? He wrote his fucking thesis on that, show a little respect."

Awkward smile from his wife.

The friend on a trip from Antwerp, whose question we are barely touching on, isn't paying attention. She lazily plays with the scrambled eggs on her plate, staring out at the faces on the street with amber eyes.

I stare where she is staring and see nothing but mountains of flesh gesticulating wildly about the Upper East Side in the midday glow.

I turn back to the rest of the table, and thankfully they have moved on to some other topic. The words are like mud I am stuck in and can't get out of. I glance at each face but they seem plastic and rigid. I try to imitate each change in feature I see, to avoid staying out of the dialogue.

They ask the girl from Antwerp about traveling and what she thinks of New York. A moment passes as she breaks away her gaze from the people outside, another moment while she takes a bite of the eggs she has slid around her plate, and she responds.

“It feels like everyone in New York can’t escape its weight.”

Silence.

“Just last month I was in Trento. This spring is
Tijuana, and then in summer, *Thailand*...”
“I loved Italy, France, Germany, Switzerland, Sweden,
Spain, Portugal, Scotland, the Netherlands, Australia..”
“But New York is the greatest city in the fuckin’
world! London, Berlin, Tokyo, fuckin’ Beijing can’t
compare.”

A few scoffs.

The girl from Antwerp doesn’t blink, just sips her mimosa staring blankly at them all.

My heart pounds like sixteen thousand refugees at the border. The silverware in my hand slips out, and clatters on my plate.

“It is lovely this time of year though.”

“Oh yes, the early winter and the first snow!
You must stick around for the first snow. A
white New York is like no other.”

"And when the trees go out! The lights glimmer like diamonds and it reminds me of being a child and counting down the days."

"It really is a marvel. Have you been to Central Park yet? A carriage is a must at least once."

Under my breath, I begin to hum Dexter Gordon's rendition of "The Christmas Song" and picture the Village Vanguard covered in snow.

"Some jazz does seem to fit the season well."

Stunned, I turn to the girl from Antwerp. For a moment I see your face but it fades back to this new moment.

But the moment is gone, the conversation has already moved to spring travels and the girl from Antwerp is back to staring out the far window, coffee now in hand.

I can feel the blue blood coursing through my hand, begging to be turned red all over the floor. My left-hand raises the fork as my right fades through the tabletop to my lap.

The faces shift to hues of static, and the waiter's face is now that of a Lizard, and I am fading into the depths of myself.

Central Park 86th Street Transverse; 2:42 PM

The cold air feels almost soothing now. It winds its way down my esophagus into my lungs, freezing away at the uncertainty. It tastes like car exhaust going down though. Taxis flood the transverse, filled with early gifts and children with faces of wonderment, and tourists gawking at the skyline and I want to set the whole thing ablaze and take it down with me.

Some conversation from earlier is flying about my head in circles but I can't place any of the words.

Midtown. Uber. Gin. Xanax. Dancing. Prix fixe. Venmo.

Whatever.

My fists tighten into a mess of flesh and bone, the pressure building and melting it all into an amalgamation of something vaguely human. My boots stick, melting to the pavement. I stare up at the treeline, pus pouring out the corners of my mouth.

"You say something?"

"I'm just...not sure I'm up for all that, and with the job…"

"Ahh, yeah, forgot about that. Listen, next time, OK?"

I stare at the back of the head of the girl from Antwerp and wonder if there will ever be a next time.

Central Park, Bow Bridge; 3:29 PM

I'm lagging behind now. The chatter of people, the cacophony of merriment is grating.

The girl from Antwerp is just ahead of me, taking in the sights, listening to someone talk about their new apartment.

Leaves are being crushed, pulverized to nothing beneath hundreds of feet. The faintest hint of snow is beginning to come down and I finish the last of the coffee from the Starbucks we stopped at after brunch. It melts as it lands on her hair.

Buzz.

One new message from you illuminates my screen, though it's in my pocket, I know it's you.

I brace myself and pull out my phone and read.

"Listen, I know it's only been a few weeks, but I really meant it when I said I wanted to stay friends.
There's a party tonight at Roberto's place, and he really wants to see you stop by. Rooftop thing. Bring some people. Hope you're ok."

The ground is spinning faster than usual, colors inverting. I swallow down the longing and try to catch up with everyone.

"Listen, there's this thing later at Roberto's in Ridgewood. He did something like this last year too, with space heaters

and warm drinks on the rooftop. I don't know if y'all feel like slumming it, or whatever."

My brother is looking at his watch, the ground, about to respond when the girl from Antwerp speaks up.

"That sounds lovely. What time? I have to stop by my hotel first and check in with my family soon, maybe change into something warmer."

My brother looks a little lost, his wife is smiling.

"How absolutely bohemian, winter rooftop! Space heaters!"

"It's been a while since we've seen those weirdo friends of yours, sure, why not."

"I adore Queens, it's so quaint, sometimes I wish I could give up Manhattan and just settle down there."

44th Street and 6th Ave; 4:44 PM

The sky opens up and bleeds pink. A sign of death, of bloodshed, blood spilling down alleyways and racing across the pavement, spilling out of the neon signs and screens and over my body.

Telephone wires crisscross the synapses of my brain, choking out the message I am trying to send to my limbs to keep walking.

The howl of cars and people is overwhelming. A cacophony of lives plays itself out all around me. The ground underneath me shakes as if an earthquake hit and I have to remember there are no fault lines under Manhattan. Just subways and thousands of dead rats.

I scream until my lungs fill with bile.
I scream to the skyline to settle down and hold me.
I scream for the faces on the screen, 30 feet tall.
I scream for the man thirty stories up looking down at the scene.
I scream for the man peddling fake Louis Vitton.
I scream into the depths of my being, searching for the child lost to the decades.
I scream to the god pulling night over the city and its indifference to my pleading.
I scream for you.
Screaming.
Screaming the darkness envelops the intersection as the lights change and I snap out of my dreaming.

Ridgewood, rooftop; 10:27 PM

Conversations about body modification, hormones, drugs, social causes, Instagram, the idea of celebrity, beauty products, pettiness, money, poverty, righteousness, subversion, confessions, atheism, transhumanism, the occult, zodiac signs, IPAs vs Sours, gin-based cocktails, theses, tattoos, undergarments, paranoia, nature, hiking, bahn-mi, Ye, AOC, benevolence, violence, apartheid, native culture, imperialism, materialism, toothpaste, decay, the best pizza place in the neighborhood, diminished chords, modular synthesis, drunken open mics, Myanmar, cancer treatment, PrEP, ignoble thoughts, sex work, exploitation, Vice Media, summer picnics in the park, the conversion rate from fahrenheit to celsius, Dungeons and Dragons, renewing passports, Roe v. Wade, eye exams, late generation Pokémon, Netflix passwords, the life cycles of marsupials, piano wire as an implement of death, who even was Stalin, heterocromatic eyes, rolling fields of green and swift sunrises, you, Santiago, amulets, quarantine, intentional isolation and withdrawal, holding a friends hair while they puke, the scent of gasoline, K-pop, armed robbery, insurrection, neon, New Jersey, Amsterdam, Ohio, the Levant, Tibet, San Diego, Bloemfontein, the uselessness of grammar, repetition, alliteration, assonance, dissonance, subterfuge, Mothman, conspiracy theories, Q, Nibiru, Zendaya, Tao Lin, Jennifer Hudson, Aaliyah, whitewashing, powerwashing, sepsis, preservatives, scorpions, the historical Buddha, pop song structure, cashews, venomous frogs, historical fiction, Kendo, glocks, tote bags, envy, tithing, Awakening, not being able to forget, insomnia, jealousy of

your best friend, silence, answers, yesterday, tomorrow, indifference, etc.

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etcetera.

Ridgewood, rooftop, off to the side; 10:58 PM

The girl from Antwerp is staring down below at the pedestrians on the sidewalk. I approach slowly, hoping not to catch her off guard.

“Evans or Monk?”

I stop in my tracks.

“Evans.”

Silence.

“*Sunday* might be a perfect record, that’s all.”

“I see” she says as I take the seat next to her, as she tears her gaze away from the street below.

“Last time I was in New York, I went there.”

“I’ve never been myself, not really sure why.”

She stares through my eyes, into the fortress of nothingness that is my skull while taking a drag on black lips, releasing fumes into the atmosphere, polluting my thoughts.

She asks for the connection to these people, this place. I turn around to see my brother sharing a belly laugh with our host, <u>your</u> ex, Mark. I brush over our history and <u>yours</u> and his by stating we all go back to our first jobs here in New York.

“They seem nice.”

I can’t tell if she means it or not. I can’t tell if I care, or whether or not I would agree.

Then the building sways and the two of us are at sea, alone. Waves crash against the hull of our ship, the ocean spray misting her face, gleaming in the night sky.

“So, uh, what brings you to New York?”

My voice feels like an anchor caught on the ocean floor.

“Nothing really in particular. To see Kate, museums, music, to just not be at home. What keeps you in New York?”

I think for a long while. What indeed? Why with strained relationships, no work that can excite or sustain me, barely scraping by, unable to afford the glamor that draws people here; what keeps me?

“I don’t know really where else I might belong, I guess.”

“Belonging is overrated. Belonging is the giving yourself away to stagnation and decay.”

My heart swells and wants to belong inside her chest, her’s beating against mine. To become an evaporation of flesh, to decay together anywhere.

“What excites you?”

She ponders the question. Her raven locks frame a face etched in marble for antiquity. Sunsets deep in her eyes. Lips forming sonnets before they even part.

“Curious people, passionate people, caring people. Dissecting the modern and ancient problems that plague people, with people. Self-love and individuality. Building toward a more beautiful, just world.”

“Have you ever read Fanon? Or Friere?”

“I *loved* ‘Pedagogy of the Oppressed.’ To empower the people…”

We talked and talked as if there was nothing in this world but our words. We talked over nautical miles, talked until the tidal wave of the cacophonous humdrum of the other guests broke through and I was obliged to introduce the girl from Antwerp to vaguely familiar faces, voices, and names.

Ridgewood, 2nd-floor bathroom; 12:01 AM

My jaw is hanging at a new angle this time. It looks worse than before. I can't say for sure but I think my left eye is slowly drifting down my face.

No teeth tonight.

The drink in my hand tastes bitter, tastes like the words circling around outside that drove me to hide out in here.

Ridgewood; 12:24 AM

The girl from Antwerp, your hand, her thigh.

Glass shatters.

Ridgewood, Stanhope Street and Woodward Ave; 12:36 AM

A cavernous maw opens up on the side of a bodega and I stare bleakly at it. The depths of the darkness seem to stare endlessly back at me, beckoning.

Then a voice, from just behind my right ear.

“Go, there are things to see, things to hear.”

I turn, almost catching a glimpse of eyes, but find nothing behind me. Then, again, from behind:

“Come now, don’t linger.”

I turn back to the darkness and slowly begin to enter.

Location, unidentifiable; time, uncertain

The air is heavy with a stagnant moisture and a darkness that is difficult to fathom. Every time I believe my eyes are about to adjust and make out some feature of the walls or the ground below my feet, the image slips out of my grasp and I am plunged once more into blindness.

My watch and phone appear to be dead. It feels as if I've been walking all night. Every direction is the same darkness, there is no sign of where I entered.

I try to touch the ground but there is no sensation other than a resistance that tells me, 'no further.'

My thoughts are fragments as I continue onward.

Nothingness surrounds, consumes, devours. The edges of myself melt into it, my breath is time eating away at itself.

Location, unidentifiable; time, elapsed

The voice reappears.

“Are you ready to listen?”

The shattering of the silence is deafening. It is a shock to my system that takes a minute to recover from.

“**What**Who***/is***are*can't***this***you*breathe*.*”

“Slow down. You will see soon enough.”

The voice sounds foreign, inhuman, and distant. Yet somehow I can’t escape the feeling I have heard it before.

“See what? What is there to see? There’s nothing here, just emptiness…”

“You are lost, searching, looking for grounding. But you’ve been circling it for too long, you’ve become untethered.”

“Untethered from what? From who??”

“That is what you must find and see for yourself.”

“Who Is it? Is it her? The girl from Antwerp?”

“No. Nothing so trivial as those misguided loves. A deeper connection.”

“Who…where..?”

“Here, somewhere, for you to find. You are so far from it that I will try to make it somewhat easier for you, but you still need to uncover for yourself.”

“Where do I even start?”

“Where indeed.” The voice contemplates for a moment or two.

“Beginnings for beginnings. What’s your earliest memory of this place?”

“I guess…I guess maybe Penn Station?”

Penn Station; 12:38 AM

The bathrooms of Penn hold a vileness that few other places on Earth could muster. Finding myself there against my will was almost too much for me at this point.

Stumbling through lost bodies, brushing shoulders, catching eyes, I enter the waiting area for the LIRR, as if fresh off the Ronkonkoma line, dazed and unclear of what direction to turn next.

“Hey buddy, can I have a dollar for a cupocoffee?”

I stare bleakly at the face the words pour out of and ask what day it is. He moves on to the next empty vessel for his despondent pleading.

I spinspinspin, looking for the way to the 2-line, hoping that maybe any escape will lead to something of more substance.

2 Train; 1:09 AM

I contemplate the voice and its words and stare out the window into the graffiti'd, dimly lit, fast-passing tunnel. I can't seem to remember where the 2 ends going downtown, but I fathom some end must be better than that beginning.

A young couple makes out next to me and my longing beats me to a pulp that might be considered "extra pulpy" orange juice.

Nostrand Ave; 1:47 AM

Manhattan back to Brooklyn brought no more clarity to the words that met me in that desolate place; I sought refuge in the nearest bodega to help ground me.

“How we doin’ boss?”

“Fine, uh…fine.”

“Uh, yeah, alright boss, sounds good boss.”

I stare into the humming refrigerators trying to decide what beverage would make me feel like myself again, my vacant stare looking exhausted and thinning. Some trap song plays overhead, voices conduct sales in frustrated tones. Sugar, alcohol, artificial flavors, tooth decay, bloating, misery.

I stumble out with a tall boy and echoes of “goodnight, boss.”

Home; 3:33 AM

The whole way home was a blur. The words of the voice continued to echo in my head. There was something I needed to find here in this city that would bring clarity, grounding. It all seemed like nonsense, even more so the closer I got to finishing the tallboy that I had purchased at that Midwood bodega.

I am slumped into my desk chair wrapped in blankets trying to recover some of the heat from the long walk.

What was the point of sending me to Penn Station? The voice mentioned beginnings, maybe I needed to reflect back to my early days here for a clue.

I was living with Roy in the dorms and bussing tables through most of college.

My bedroom lights begin flickering as soon as I began recalling the kitchen at my old college job. The lights twinkle as I fade from consciousness into the smell of the floor mats and wet food and herbs and fire and the cleaning products all mixed together.

East 10th & First Ave; 7:27 PM

It's the middle of the dinner rush, my heart is racing and my head is tucked into a waste bin.

"GET THE FUCK OUT THERE AND CLEAR THOSE TABLES YA LITTLE SHIT."

It's the head chef, I'll never forget that voice.

"THOSE TABLES NEED TO TURN OVER ASAP, OR YOUR ASS BETTER NOT SHOW UP TOMORROW."

I force the remnants of my stomach up and exit the kitchen, the stench of my bile mixing with the dirty dishes.

In the dim lighting, I make my way to table 6, catching a few stares from the eyes of waiting customers, and begin clearing plates when a soft "thanks" catches me off guard.

It's the first time I ran into you outside of class; before we officially "met". And then I remember this night, the night I quit this job and took 2 very broke months off before my next bussing gig.

"Not a problem," I mutter and race back to the kitchen with half the plates I should have grabbed.

What's going on, I remember this night, how am I back here living it??

Jose grabs the small stack from me with a look of concern about the number of plates I brought back on this trip.

Before Chef can notice I race back out to clumsily take the rest of your friend's plates and scramble back to the kitchen, hoping your eyes are too distracted to catch mine.

The stench of my bile hits me as I enter the kitchen and based on the look on Chef's face, I'm not the only one smelling it.

"WHAT IN THE FUCK DID YOU DO TO MY KITCHEN?"

And for the first moment, I break from the memories and yell back "I'M JUST TRYING TO SURVIVE YOU STUPID ASSHOLE!"

And then, suddenly, the lights are out and the kitchen is empty, spotless.

I look at my phone and it says 2:03 AM and I know I am back to whatever constitutes the present.

I fall to the freshly mopped floors and curl into a ball, breathing heavily.

Fuck, what was that?

Saint Marks Place and 3rd Ave; 2:09 AM

Ray's is where I went after every shift for those 3 months at that first job, shaking with anxiety, eating a slice or two that I purchased with my cut of each evening's tip money.

I would sit there, my eyes staring into the void of my phone trying to refind a sense of self, while everyone surrounding me was in their own digital haze, a static storm that consumed us all.

I am swept up in the emotion of that night, the freedom from that miserable job, the uncertainty of how I'd afford my meals, and the insurmountable longing I felt for you. It all feels so visceral, yet distant, it's nauseating. Nothing makes sense, because that's not how it went down. Instead, I waited til the end of the evening to meagerly text the manager that "I need to focus on school" and then blocked her number.

The small table I'm at begins to shake, first slowly but continuing to build to a violent tremor in the ground. No one around me seems to notice though, they're riding this electric bull like it's nothing.

I head down the street to see cicadas burst onto the skyline.

Empire State Building; 2:44 AM

A wound is open at the base of the iconic appendage of the city, a tear exploding with fumes and cicadas, ruptured open like the flesh of the belly.

The gaping maws look like shrieks of horror on the faces surrounding me, though they are all looking up at the appendage and not at the gaping maw reflecting their faces at their feet.

That voice echoes out of the opening, shaking me to my core;

“You’re missing the point.”

The voice cracks like thunder in my head, ricocheting like lightning across my synapses.

“You’re not looking for what you remember from your past, or what you would change, but what you missed that was there all along.”

I stand there speechless, trying to make sense of what I might be missing.

“What else then?”

“Really, it’s less what else and more what next, isn’t it?”

And with that, the already cleft-open sidewalk at my feet tears open wider and I tumble into the depths.

NYU Bobst Library; 4:44 PM

Looking up from Ulysses, I find myself on the third floor of Bobst. Ulysses was for my sophomore year English Lit class, early fall semester. You and I had just started dating and I found myself completely unable to focus on anything besides the love poems I sent you in my more vulnerable moments.

I look and catch glimpses of eyes around me, trying to remember what day this might be. Sitting next to me is my sophomore-year roommate Li, looking to be absent-mindedly sketching mandalas instead of reading his biochem textbook.

"I think the fluoride in the water is actually to make us all more complacent. The mercury in our fillings is the pathway for the fluoride to reach our nervous system quicker."

I think all the LSD has fried his brain, but as a roommate, he is quiet and clean and pays his rent on time.

"Do you ever feel like you're missing something important?

His eyes barely blink in front of the Mandala.

"Constantly. We're missing everything of import. Even the things directly in front of our eyes we miss most of the time."
I glance about, hoping to catch whoever I am supposed to be looking for, but everyone's faces are turned down or away.

“How do you grasp what you’re not even sure you’re trying to find?”

He sits for a minute, silent. I wonder if he heard me at all when he turns to me, and in a different voice, *that* voice, he says;

“Let it come to you. That’s all you can do.”

I stare deep into his eyes, searching for the source of that voice. But they seem as vacant as when I ask him about the mail or if he finished the coffee without buying more or where my toothbrush disappeared to.

“Dude, I said just tell her how you feel.”

Then I remember, this was the day I finally worked up the courage to tell you “I love you” and a week before you said it back.

I look back up and shadows cover every face surrounding me, deep endless shadows absorbing every light in the library and all my resolve.

Each void grows and grows, connecting in a constellation of black holes, my heart sinking into the intense gravitational pull of that week of waiting that comes back so close to home.

6 Train; 6:06 PM

Eyes following me everywhere I go. Eyes unblinking in their gazes. Eyes tracing the outline of my frame.Eyes behind my eyes boring inward past all my defenses. Eyes blinking to life across my skin, eyes staring back at me.

46 Bowery; 7:57 PM

Dinner.

You.

The night that led us toward years of on-and-off amorous coalescence.

You wanted to try soup dumplings for the first time. I couldn't get Li's statement out of my head. Just as the soup burst forth scalding your mouth, those words burst out of mine.

You sat there, your tongue seared, speechless.

I sat there regretting each moment after I uttered that sentiment despite feeling it deeper with each passing second.

I feel that feeling again of losing myself to those eyes. Drowning in their amber depths, reflecting the lilac of the moon mixing with the neon of the restaurant's sign. Begging for you to let me breathe, knowing you have absolutely no say in my lost breath.

The older couple in their matching stark white hair next to us starts muttering in swift Cantonese, their lips moving faster than sound, and I almost wish Li was here with us to confirm that they're talking about you and me and the words that changed everything.

65 Bayard St; 8:38 PM

Lychee for you, black sesame for me. You comment on the chill Autumn air and how if you were back in Santiago it'd be the right temperature for ice cream. I try to catch your eyes but you avert your gaze.

And then you say but then you wouldn't be here with me and the ice cream tastes better next to me as you continue to not hold my hand or my arm like you have on every previous date prior and then you comment more on the weather and how you still can't adjust to New York winters and you wished we could hop on the A express all the way down to Chile, just falling asleep for a minute as we pass through the Cordillera de la Costa, the clouds breaking at the peaks as the sun rises and we could explore the streets of Santiago in spring with the flavors of Chile for our ice cream as your hand curls up the end of the sleeve of your sweatshirt and the arm crosses in front of your body, away from my hand that ever so slightly you probably didn't even notice was reaching out in your direction as an attempt to bring you closer to me after I laid bare how close I wanted to be and you recovered from the shock by commenting on the food and the waitress and decor and the couple next to us and the line for the bathroom and your craving something sweet after such a meal without ever looking me once in the eye. You ask then if I want to try some lychee as you quickly glance up.

Home; 4:44 AM

I can't fathom what else I am going to find rehashing old memories, especially of you, if you're not even what I am supposed to be looking for. I can feel my heart swelling and breaking simultaneously and I can't make any sense at all.

I trace the sigils across my face with the ash from the letters I have been burning. They have begun to cascade down my arms and torso and glow when the ash makes contact with them.

Stairs of the MET; 2:23 PM

You held my hand occasionally that whole week, but it was here, now, when you grabbed my hand, pulled my ear to your lips, and with your eyes closed ended that week with a whisper and a kiss.

On those steps, amongst the hundred or so mostly tourists and the pigeons and the hotdog vendors and the cabs and everyone in all of New York could have been there but I still swear in that second we were all that made up this godforsaken city.

The moment, the zenith of the 21st century, when everything was absolutely perfect.

That singular moment.

Because it was only that moment when it was absolutely, one hundred percent the total truth of you and me.

NYU Bobst Library Again; 4:44 PM Again

Now it's you, Li, and me on the third floor most mornings and afternoons and evenings as the semester edges onward, but your gaze flickers in the lights of the desks to the eyes of the first girl you cheated on me with, saying since she wasn't a guy what was the harm anyways and besides, you didn't have an accepting environment back home to explore your sexuality and I tried to recover from it and give you your freedom to gaslight me to fit your whims.

Sarah and I would end up becoming friends for the period of time you weren't talking to either of us.

Sarah and I would get together at Bobst just like you and I were now and try to guess who you would sleep with next to break our hearts.

It was a petty and shallow companionship but one I think we both needed to work through if we were ever to move on. You let her move on but kept coming back and reeling me in on your line of promises.

But here then I didn't yet know, and here now I know knowing won't change my mind then or now.

So instead, I gently massage your shoulder as I finish Ulysses and my final notes in the margins that I will soon realize I would have to go back and transcribe for actual reference.

Li does not seem to realize anything has changed to the routine, continuing to ignore his textbooks and drawing mandalas while somehow maintaining near-straight As.

I repeated those final lines over and over and dreamed of my mountain flower who would be blooming back in Santiago for the spring semester while I took an internship at the news start-up we both ended up working at after graduation.

As the lines spinspinspin circles inside of my otherwise vacant head, and I write my prayers in Joyce's words on the back of your neck with my index finger, I know that the void is growing again from the pupils of the eyes of each face in the building as they all turn up from their books and screens and direct the expanding void directly at me.

7th Ave between W 36th & 37th Ave; 7:14 PM

The company holiday party; Six months since graduation and your official move with a work visa to New York, three months since you broke up with me for the longest stretch, and two months since you started to date Mark, your cubicle neighbor in the journalism department.

I feel ready to cough blood up into my paper cup of wine, staining my red tie even further red.

I stare from the back end of the bar towards the two of you, as you play with your hair like you used to after The Met. Your eyes never breaking away from his as you laugh at some story he is telling the founder.

I turn to the tapping on my shoulder, my eyes falling on Ashley's amber stare, silhouetted by neon. She asks what I am drinking with her lips parting for her glass. She asks how I am enjoying the night as her fingers drum slowly on the bar countertop, inches from my resting hand. She asks what I've been listening to as her thumb and index finger play with her earlobe. She asks what my plans are for the holidays as she tousles her hair in a slow deliberate manner. She asks if I enjoyed the evening as she lingers in a hug goodnight for a breath or two longer than anyone but you has held me.

I stumble away in a daze, horrified by the melting faces of my coworkers, skin dripping from glistening white skulls. Their voices meld and wind together, amplifying each one into a cacophonous blur that fills my ears and my lungs until I feel their words pouring back out of me at their feet, caked

in bile and blood, the stench of their thoughts burning my nasal passages.

The platitudes feel endless, the same stories told during work retold with more slurring than usual, the forced kindness and holiday spirit, the echoes of each sentiment reflecting back in agreement with an overly saccharine feel.

Bathroom; 7:38 PM

I can feel the glyphs etched deep in my skin running the entire length of my body. I open my mouth and all I see is teeth. I try to vomit up my last few glasses of wine but my body refuses, bottling it up with glass and cork in my liver.

The skin seared off their faces was one thing, but when the flies and maggots began pouring out of laughing mouths and the sockets of glistening eyes, I couldn't manage for a second more.

I mutter incantations and prayers as I look back at the mirror, still trying to piece anything together. I catch out of the corner of my eye that shape looming over my shoulder, breathing down my neck.

Was it Ashley? Was it these coworkers who I hid from and ignored invites from and said nothing to on my last day?

I cry out for the voice to just tell me what I am looking for already.

All I am met with is silence.

7th Ave between W 36th & 37th Ave; 11:19 PM

It somewhat resembles how it looked on my last day but the name of the company that took the space over is foreign, some sort of app it would seem. Completely empty and still, I slowly wind my way through the space toward my old cubicle and sit down in the chair.

Minutes, hours, seconds pass. I look up and left, toward your cubicle where I would catch glances of the smiles he helped plaster onto your face. The stars pour in through the floor-to-ceiling windows, a faint lilac glow cast over where you sat.

I can't recall where Ashley sat. I can't recall her last name.

But I can recall the way you pronounce every single word, the way your r's could shake me to my core, and that you could never figure out Willoughby even a year after that was our stop on the G.

I can trace the exact path you would take from the elevator to your chair, avoiding the direct line past my desk to speak with Cait in Social Media who you never said a nice thing about when she wasn't around.

I can't even remember in what department she worked, because you never spoke of Ashley, and my attention was so wrapped within the confines of your words, your gaze.

I glance again at the lilac glow and imagine you blossoming forth from the lights, but I am here, in silence surrounded by

dozens of blank computer monitors and desk phones and the hum of the heaters.

233 Butler St; 1:27 AM

The bass is pounding and I feel free. Molly will do that to you.

The faces are glowing and beautiful and my heart beats with the movement of the hundred bodies that feel connected to mine as one.

I spinspinspin, as the straw of the drink in my hand spinspinspins with me and I stare at the disco ball above my head spinspinspin as my feet feel the world beneath me spinspinspin.

I never got her name, but the girl who approached me with a wide grin and perfect teeth, and deep chestnut eyes pulled me to the center of the dance floor and barely left an inch between us. The weight in my chest felt lifted and I even felt ok as I saw you and Mark kissing at the bar.

In the process of mustering up the courage to kiss her, I feel your hand on my shoulder grip tight and I spinspinspin on my heels and follow you off the dancefloor into the lobby.

Tears slowly drift down your olive cheeks.

I ask if Mark had done something and you just continue to sob. I ask if it's the molly, but then remember you were doing a sober January for the new year.

Bathroom; 1:31 AM

You always tasted sweeter after a long break, and that had been the longest break we took (before now).

Brooklyn Bridge; 2:16 AM

Your hand in my hand, your hair blowing in the wind. I stop in my tracks and as you turn toward me, I ask you now what I should have asked you that evening.

“Why were you really crying?”

You don’t respond, just stare vacantly into my eyes. My voice raises without me meaning to.

“Huh? Why were you really crying? You never told me, that night or any time after? You just kept crying until I asked what I could do and you pulled me into the bathroom.”

Your eyes never leave mine.

“Was it so hard to just say you were jealous? That you, even for just that moment, wanted me as much as I constantly wanted you. You stole me away from happiness because for once you weren’t the center of my joy.”

You stand there motionless, I know, unable to move because this never happened. You never answered, but I never asked. Instead, I let you take me back to Mark’s and your’s apartment. He slept on the couch. Your lease ended 3 weeks later and we moved in together, “just as friends.”

LaGuardia; 3:18 PM

Crowds and rolling suitcases and taxis blaring and fluorescent lights. An intercom overhead calls for boarding for the 3:59 PM flights to Santiago.

Strange, I remember you always taking red eyes.

I turn to face you, remembering the handful of times I saw you off when you would go to visit home. I turn but catch no sight of you.

I look every which way, my eyes searching the bug-eyed faces and glistening maws of the faces protruding from the giant singular throbbing crowd, but see nothing but strangeness and distortions. I look up to ground myself and read the Welcome to LaGuardia signage twenty feet up.

Wait, you only ever flew out of JFK. Me too.

I spinspinspin, but there's still no sign of you and I am utterly lost. This isn't a memory.

The pulsating crowd shifts in irregular manners and forms the shape of a horror that bends my mind. The voices fade into one, and it's that voice.

"Have you seen anything yet?"

I scream back.

"All I know is it's not her. But I don't know who."

A semi-silence falls as the limbs of the mass continue to gesticulate in a haphazard manner, slowly.

“Is it even a who? I don’t know what I am looking for. But I am tired. Please, can’t you just give me a little more guidance?”

The limbs freeze in place and all I hear is that refrigerator hum.

A guttural shriek releases from my throat and the mass is back to a regular crowd and security tackles me.

Bellevue Hospital; Time Unclear

The doctors seemed overworked and uninterested once they knew I wasn't actually a danger to anyone. I don't remember my way here or to the Emergency Department, but somewhere along that way, they got it in their minds I was a violent risk to others in my psychotic break, so they had me admitted. They say by noon they'll likely release me, but for now, I gotta sleep here.

I try to piece together the events since the party, they're telling me it's only been about 24 hours, though I feel like I have been awake for days.

And I wait. And wait. And wait. And wait. And wait.

But sleep never comes. My roommate Dominic begins to snore and so does the nursing assistant at the door, but sleep never finds me.

I start to picture <u>your</u> face when suddenly the voice appears.

"No, that won't do. If you can't find it here then this was a waste of time."

Before I can begin to process what the voice has uttered, I feel myself fall through the thin sheets and mattress, to some unknown below.

Greenwood Cemetery; 11:11 PM

The headstones all loom like grey, huddled figures and I feel rooted in my place.

The voice booms like thunder in the sky. “Take your time, every name you do and don’t remember is here, waiting for you.”

Ashley, Mark, Li, James, John, Dominic, Roy, Jose, Sarah, Cait, Peter, Roberto, Jesse, Paul, Wendy, Sam, Sabrina, Tim, Alex, Owen, Mike, Adrienne, Pierre, Donald, Emma, Daniel, Jim, Esther, Nick, Kevin, Nate, Marie, Emily, Kaitlyn, Jackie, Floyd, Vincent, Jackson, Max, Mohammad, Benjamin, Jenny, Abbie, Julia, Moira, Stephen, Stephanie, Ciaran, Fred, Sunny, Bell, Andreas, Troy, Carmin, Alan, Jeff, Geoff, Tori, Meghan, Henry, Gavin, Michael, Lauren, Elyse, William, Anne, Eva, Juliette, Amber, Bianca, Pedro, Craig, Shaun, Rob, Jean, Devin, Earl, Caroline, Jamie, Shannon, Remington, Justin, Kori, Hannah, Tyler, Erica, Kristen, Hans, Harvey, Rufus, Franz, Jerry, George, Elaine, Jess, Lester, Jillian, Evan, Catherine, Kenneth, Derrick, Amanda, May, Chris, Georgina, June, Kelsey, Chelsea, Dave, Walter, Patrick, Tom, Bob, Noah, Frank, Lindsey, Lucy, Sophia, Claire, Richard, Lewis, Adrian, Isaac, Spencer, Omar, Robin, Megumi, Benji, Ian, Marilyn, Lydia, Jane, Quinn, Luke, Charlie, Mary, and Jordan.

“Don’t you see what’s missing?”

And then, black.

Home; 8:33 AM

At home, in bed, woken by a text that simply says.

“Hey, it’s Jackie, I’m sorry.”

And after a moment, Andrew sighs and starts the day.